

John Goldthorpe: class and occupation

Some sociologists have been dissatisfied with descriptive class schemes, claiming that they merely reflect social and material inequalities between classes rather than seeking to explain the class processes which give birth to them. With such concerns in mind, sociologist John Goldthorpe created a scheme for use in empirical research on social mobility. The *Goldthorpe class scheme* was designed not as a hierarchy, but as a representation of the 'relational' nature of contemporary class structure.

Goldthorpe's theories have been highly influential. His account of class is discussed in this section. His writings on social mobility are examined below on pp. 330–1.

Although Goldthorpe now underplays any explicit theoretical influence on his scheme (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993), sociologists have often pointed to the Goldthorpe classification as an example of a neo-Weberian class scheme. This is because Goldthorpe's original scheme identified class locations on the basis of two main factors: market situation and work situation. An individual's *market situation* concerns his or her level of pay, job security and prospects for advancement; it emphasizes material rewards and general life chances. The *work situation*, by contrast, focuses on questions of control, power and authority within the occupation. An individual's work situation is concerned with the degree of autonomy in the workplace and the overall relations of control affecting an employee.

Goldthorpe devised his scheme by evaluating occupations on the basis of their

Table 9.1 Goldthorpe's class scheme

Class			Employment relation
Service	I	Higher-grade professionals, administrators and officials. Large managers and proprietors.	Employer or service relationship.
	II	Lower-grade professionals, administrators and officials. Small managers and proprietors.	
Intermediate	III	Routine non-manual employees in administration and commerce (largely clerical). Rank and file employees in service industries.	Intermediate.
	IIIb	Routine non-manual employees, lower grade (sales and services).	Intermediate (men), labour contract (women).
	IV	Small proprietors and self-employed artisans.	Employer.
	IVb	Small proprietors and artisans without employees.	Self-employed.
	IVc	Farmers and smallholders, other self-employed agricultural.	Employer or self-employed.
	V	Lower-grade technicians, supervisors of manual workers.	Intermediate.
	VI	Skilled manual workers.	Labour contract.
Working	VII	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers.	Labour contract.
	VIIb	Agricultural workers.	Labour contract.

Source: Adapted from Crompton (1998), p. 67

relative market and work situations. The resulting classification is shown in table 9.1. Encompassing eleven class locations, Goldthorpe's scheme is more detailed than many others. Yet in common usage the class locations are compressed into three main class strata: a 'service' class (classes I and II), an 'intermediate class' (classes III and IV) and a 'working class' (classes V, VI and VII).

Goldthorpe also acknowledges the presence of an elite class of property holders at the very top of the scheme, but argues that it is such a small segment of society that it is not meaningful as a category in empirical studies.

In recent writings Goldthorpe has emphasized *employment relations* within his scheme, rather than the notion of work situation described above (Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992). By this, Goldthorpe draws attention to different types of employment contract. A labour contract supposes an exchange of wages and effort which is specifically defined and delimited, while a service contract has a 'prospective' element such as the possibility of salary growth or promotion. According to Goldthorpe, the working class is characterized by labour contracts and the service class by service contracts; the intermediate class locations experience intermediate types of employment relations.

Evaluating Goldthorpe's class scheme

Goldthorpe's class scheme has been used widely in empirical research. It has been useful in highlighting class-based inequalities, such as those related to health and education, as well as reflecting class-based dimensions in voting patterns, political outlooks and general social attitudes. Yet it

is important to note several significant limitations to schemes such as Goldthorpe's which should caution us against applying them uncritically.

Occupational class schemes are difficult to apply to the *economically inactive*, such as the unemployed, students, pensioners and children. Unemployed and retired individuals are often classified on the basis of their previous work activity, although this can be problematic in the case of the long-term unemployed or people with sporadic work histories. Students can sometimes be classified according to their discipline, but this is more likely to be successful in cases where the field of study correlates closely to a specific occupation (such as engineering or medicine).

Class schemes based on occupational distinctions are also unable to reflect the importance of *property ownership* and *wealth* to social class. Occupational titles alone are not sufficient indicators of an individual's wealth and overall assets. This is particularly true among the richest members of society, including entrepreneurs, financiers and the 'old rich', whose occupational titles of 'director' or 'executive' place them in the same category as many professionals of much more limited means. In other words, class schemes derived from occupational categories do not accurately reflect the enormous concentration of wealth among the 'economic elite'. By classifying such individuals alongside other upper-class professionals, the occupational class schemes dilute the relative weight of property relations in social stratification.

John Westergaard is one sociologist who has disputed Goldthorpe's view that because the rich are so few in number they

can be excluded from schemes detailing class structure. As Westergaard argues:

It is the intense concentration of power and privilege in so few hands that makes these people top. Their socio-structural weight overall, immensely disproportionate to their small numbers, makes the society they top a class society, whatever may be the pattern of divisions beneath them. (1995: 127)

As we have seen, there are a number of complexities involved in devising class schemes that can reliably 'map' the class structure of society. Even within a relatively 'stable' occupational structure, measuring and mapping social class is fraught with diffi-

culty. Yet the rapid economic transformations occurring in industrial societies have made the measurement of class even more problematic, and have even led some to question the usefulness of class as a concept. New categories of occupations are emerging, there has been a general shift away from industrial production towards service and knowledge work, and an enormous number of women have entered the workforce in recent decades. Occupational class schemes are not necessarily well suited to capturing the dynamic processes of class formation, mobility and change that are provoked by such social transformations.

Using your sociological imagination: the death of class?

In recent years there has been a vigorous debate within sociology about the usefulness of 'class'. Some sociologists, such as Ray Pahl, have even questioned whether it is still a useful concept in attempting to understand contemporary societies. Australian academics Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters have been prominent amongst those who argue that class is no longer the key to understanding contemporary societies. In their book, *The Death of Class* (1996), they argue that contemporary societies have undergone profound social changes and are no longer to be accurately seen as 'class societies'.

A time of social change

Pakulski and Waters argue that industrial societies are now undergoing a period of tremendous social change. We are witnessing a period when the political, social and economic importance of class is in decline. Industrial societies have changed from being organized class societies to a new stage, which Pakulski and Waters call 'status conventionalism'. Pakulski and Waters use this term to indicate that inequalities, although they remain, are the result of differences in status (prestige) and in the lifestyle and consumption patterns favoured by such status groups. Class is no longer an important factor in a person's identity, and the

class communities exemplified by Young and Willmott's study of Bethnal Green (1973) are a thing of the past. These changes in turn mean that attempts to explain political and social behaviour by reference to class are also out of date. Class, it seems, is well and truly dead.

Property ownership

One of the reasons for this huge shift is that there have been important changes in property ownership. Property ownership, it is claimed, is now less restricted. This means that there is both more competition amongst firms, since there are more of them, and less opportunity for a dominant capitalist or managerial class to reproduce and pass on its own privilege to the next generation of capitalists. Inequality, however, remains and, where it does arise, is the result of the failure of groups to achieve a high status, not their class position (their position in a division of labour).

Increase in consumer power

These changes have been accompanied by an increase in consumer power. In ever more competitive and diverse markets, firms have to be much more sensitive in heeding the wishes of consumers. There has thus been a shift in the balance of power in advanced industrial

societies. What marks out the underprivileged in contemporary society, what Pakulski and Waters refer to as an 'ascriptively disprivileged underclass', is their inability to engage in 'status consumption', which is to say, their inability to buy cars, clothes, houses, holidays and other consumer goods.

For Pakulski and Waters, contemporary societies are stratified, but this stratification is achieved through cultural consumption, not class position in the division of labour. It seems that they are claiming that the differences between, say, a skilled worker from Luton, who drives a Ford Escort, lives in semi-detached house worth between about £80,000 and £100,000 and who goes on package holidays to Spain, and an Oxbridge-educated lawyer living in Hampstead, who drives a Mercedes, has a house worth £200,000 and who holidays in private rented villas in Tuscany, are purely issues of status: it is not that they are members of different classes. It is all a matter of style, taste and status (prestige), not of location in the division of labour.

Processes of globalization

The shift from organized class society to status conventionalism is explained as being the result of processes of globalization, changes in the economy, technology and politics. Pakulski and Waters argue that globalization has led to a new international division of labour, in which the 'first world' is increasingly post-industrial – there are simply fewer of the sort of manual working-class occupations which characterized the previous era of 'organized class society'. At the same time, in a globalized world, nation-states are less self-contained and are less able to govern either their population or market forces than they once were. Stratification and inequality still exist, but they exist more on a global than a national basis; we see more significant inequalities between different nations than we do within a nation-state.

Economic organization in 'first world' societies, powered by technological change, has become far less reliant on unskilled manual labour. Work requires increasing levels of skill and knowledge. Production techniques reflect

post-Fordist explanations, which emphasize the need for a highly skilled and flexible labour force, producing customized goods for niche markets. As the skilled manual labour force has declined, there has been an increase in the service sector and a shift to the 'knowledge economy'.

The political and social implications

These changes have had profound political and social implications. As mentioned above, collective class-based communities have collapsed. In the case of the UK this has occurred as old industries, such as coal mining, have 'down-sized' and populations have shifted to the more affluent urbanized areas in the south. Greater geographical mobility has led to changes in family structure – single-person households are on the increase in the UK. Pakulski and Waters argue that, in the context of greater geographical mobility, the importance of the family as a site of class reproduction (as in Young and Willmott) is now very much in decline.

Drawing on the work of Ulrich Beck, Pakulski and Waters claim that we now live in an 'individualized' society. Rather than see themselves as members of a social class, people nowadays tend to see themselves simply as individuals. Their identity will be more influenced by their status, through their consumption patterns and through factors such as their race, gender, age or regional/national identity.

Nothing but a theory?

These are substantial claims – and Pakulski and Waters seem happy to make them with little in the way of empirical evidence; their book presents what is almost exclusively a theoretical argument. Many sociologists would agree that we are living through a period of tremendous social change, but have Pakulski and Waters portrayed the changes accurately?

Criticism of Pakulski and Waters has tended to focus on the way they have defined class. Rosemary Crompton has argued that, while traditional definitions of class have tended to neglect cultural factors such as gender, race and

status differences, the Pakulski and Waters definition is unhelpful and confuses class and status. John Scott and Lydia Morris also argue for a need to make distinctions between the class positions of individuals – their location in a division of labour – and the collective phenomena of social class through which people express a sense of belonging to a group and have a shared sense of identity and values. This last sense of class (a more subjective and collective sense) may or may not exist in a society at a particular time – it will depend on many social, economic and political factors.

It is this last aspect of class that appears to have diminished in recent years. This does not mean that status and the cultural aspects of

stratification are now so dominant that the economic aspects of class are of no significance; indeed, mobility studies and inequalities of wealth indicate the opposite. Class is not dead – it is just becoming that bit more complex!

Source: Abbott (2001)

Questions

- 1 Is social class, as Pakulski and Waters argue, 'dead'?
- 2 Do you see yourself as a member of a particular class? If so, how has it affected your life?

Social class divisions in Western society today

The question of the upper class

Who is right, Westergaard or Goldthorpe? Is there still a distinctive **upper class**, founded on ownership of wealth and property? Or should we be talking more of a wider service class, as Goldthorpe suggests? One way of approaching these issues is to look at how far wealth and income are concentrated in the hands of a few.

Reliable information about the distribution of wealth is difficult to obtain. Some countries keep more accurate statistics than others, but there is always a considerable amount of guesswork involved. The affluent do not usually publicize the full range of their assets; it has often been remarked that we know far more about the poor than we do about the wealthy. What is certain is that wealth is indeed concentrated in the hands of a small minority. In Britain the top 1 per cent own some 23 per

cent of all marketable wealth. The most wealthy 10 per cent of the population own well over half the total marketable wealth, while the least wealthy half of the population own only 5 per cent of the total wealth (see table 9.2).

Ownership of stocks and bonds is more unequal than holdings of wealth as a whole. The top 1 per cent in the UK own some 75 per cent of privately held corporate shares; the top 5 per cent own over 90 per cent of the total. But there has also been more change in this respect. Some 25 per cent of the population own shares, which compares with 14 per cent in 1986 – many people bought shares for the first time during the privatization programme of the Conservative government that came to power in 1979. The increase is even more dramatic when looked at over a longer period, for in 1979 only 5 per cent of the population held shares. Most of these holdings are small (worth less than £1,000 at 1991 prices), and institutional share ownership – shares held by companies in other firms – is growing faster than individual share ownership.